

Using Newspapers and Radio in English Language Teaching: The Sierra Leone Experience

By Joe Pemagbi

My lower secondary-school English teacher never failed to use an opportunity to emphasize the value of newspapers and the radio in language teaching and learning. She characteristically concluded her lessons with the advice, "Read newspapers and listen to the radio. They will enrich your English." We did not do so because we did not have radio receivers in boarding school and had very little access to newspapers. In any case, we did not know what radio programs we were expected to listen to, nor what kinds of material to look for in the newspapers.

But her advice became useful to me when I started teaching Linguistics, English and Communication Skills at a rural University with hardly any teaching and learning materials. Textbooks, if available, are never enough for the large number of students, and the use of modern language teaching facilities, painfully, remain a dream of the distant future. But the students have to learn, and to learn, they must be taught. But with what? I recalled my boarding school teacher's advice that newspapers and the radio "can enrich your language," so I turned to these resources for help.

This paper is an account of how I have used newspapers and radio to teach English in a deprived language teaching and learning environment. But this effort has not been without problems. With examples collected from newspapers and radio stations, this article discusses the problems that have been experienced in using them as English language teaching tools; suggested solutions are provided.

Newspapers as Teaching Materials

Following my teacher's advice, I soon realized that newspapers can be used to teach many aspects of language and communication skills. Editorials and gossip columns, serious and lighthearted newspapers can be used to teach formal and informal varieties of English; editorials and feature articles can provide passages for summary and comprehension; letters to the editor can demonstrate good features of letter writing; reports on court proceedings can illustrate questioning techniques; and various articles can provide direct and reported speech for grammar samples of study. Of immediate benefit is the fact that one issue of a newspaper may contain material for teaching various types of writing: description, analysis and synthesis, comparison and contrast, and process description; and they provide models of good written form: paragraphing, topic sentence, introductions, conclusions, etc. Homework assignments requiring

students to list and bring to class the vocabulary items and expressions they encounter in newspapers have become immensely valuable.

With their profuse use of West African and Sierra Leonean varieties, local newspapers have been a particularly useful tool for me in my research on local varieties of English.

What Makes Newspapers Good Teaching Tools

I have used newspapers extensively because they have certain qualities that make them effective as teaching tools in difficult teaching circumstances like ours, and these are:

Availability: A teaching tool has no value if it is not available. In the absence of other materials, newspapers are the most readily available English language teaching aid in Sierra Leone. Relevant parts of newspapers can easily be multiplied by stenciling or photocopying and made available to the class.

Affordability: Newspapers are cheap and so both instructors and students can afford to buy them, quite unlike books, which tend to be prohibitively expensive when they are available.

Relevance: Learning materials are more relevant, interesting and motivating if they are structured within the experience, culture and environment of the learner. Newspapers in Sierra Leone fulfill these qualities. For example, editorials, feature articles and gossip columns are normally based on local issues which readily arrest the attention of readers.

Malleability/Endurance: A teaching tool, especially in a technologically handicapped country like Sierra Leone, should be easy to operate. Sophisticated tools are often difficult to repair when they break down. Newspapers are beyond this problem; they are not only easy to handle, but do not break down like machines.

Cost-effectiveness: In a deprived teaching environment, the teacher's best friend is material he can use many times and for a long time. Properly handled and stored, newspapers can endure long periods of use, and the longer the period they are preserved and used, the more cost-effective they become.

The Radio as Teaching Tool

The use of the radio in language teaching cannot be overstated. The BBC and VOA language teaching programs have enjoyed worldwide appreciation for years. The School Broadcasting Unit of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service has taught French and English for years, and the radio is going to be the major channel of instruction for proposed Distance Education Programs.

The greatest advantage about the radio as a language teaching tool is that large numbers of learners can assemble around one receiver. Also, material can be recorded from it, preserved and played later to learners. Apart from prepared lessons that are relayed, learners can pick up expressions, vocabulary, pronunciation and other elements of language from the radio. It is also extremely useful for teaching listening comprehension, and particularly valuable in bringing native speakers closer to the learner.

Like the newspaper, the radio is easy to operate, cost-effective, readily available and affordable—especially at institutional levels.

Problems

Despite their advantages as teaching tools, the newspaper and the radio have posed some problems to English language teaching in Sierra Leone. For example, certain words are overused, rendering them ineffective or meaningless. The most common of these are *intimate*, *admonish*, *reiterate*, *opine*, *dock*, and *nab* which are routinely used in radio news bulletins and of course in the newspapers. In the contexts in which it is used, *intimate* stands for *announce*, *reveal*, *explain*, *pronounce*, *acquaint*, *show*, *tell*, *inform*, *apprise*, and *brief*, but these words are hardly used themselves. *Admonish* has absorbed the meaning of *advise* and *warn*; *reiterate* does not only mean *to repeat or repeat again and again*, but has taken the additional meaning of *emphasize*. *Opine* obviously means *to express an opinion, or view*, but is increasingly used in the sense of *tell*, but the mass media finds the use of this uncommon word more palatable and impressive. *Dock* is *an enclosure where the defendant stands or sits in a criminal court*. The papers use no other words or expressions. *Nab* means *to catch, arrest, grab, snatch, or seize* but none of this range of synonyms is used. It is also now used to mean *appearing in court*.

The reason for the invariable preference for these words is easy to discern. They sound learned, and literary, and bookish words or expressions—no matter how meaningless or misleading they may be—are more highly regarded in Sierra Leone than simple words and expressions, which are generally more effective. The major concern of the English language teacher is not just the misuse of these words, but also their monotonous overuse, which stifles the elements of originality and creativity that are so important in language teaching.

There are also deviant uses of prepositions, as in the following examples:

- a. *Contribute in* instead of *to*;
- b. *Confidence on* instead of *in*;
- c. *Desist for* instead of *from*;
- d. *Pride himself with*, instead of *on*;
- e. *Participating at* instead of *in*

One of the most worrying concerns of English teachers is the language of advertisement of the local FM radio stations. While the grammatical contortions and nonstandard English pronunciations may be humorous to the general public, they have become serious problems to

the already overburdened English language teacher. His/her task has been compounded by the students' use of what has come to be styled "FM English." Errors such as *goodest* (for best), *nitest and nicerable* (for nicest and nice), *accurable* (for accurate), *acceptirable and acceptrly* (for acceptable/acceptance), *speedable* (for fast), *vengetable* (for vegetable), and *suprisation* (for surprise) are gradually finding their way into the English of students, especially school children.

Other problem areas spread by the mass media are the wrong use of pairs of words that sound similar but carry different meanings. *Being* and *been* and *formerly* and *formally* are the most common of these. Wrong word forms are also frequently used by the media. For example, *uncredibility* for *incredibility* and *inavailability* for *unavailability* . Words like *evidence*, *equipment*, and *property* are pluralised in the wrong grammatical contexts.

Implications for English Language Teaching and Learning

There are, undoubtedly, some good newspapers in Sierra Leone which can be used in the classroom, but it is also true that most of the papers only provide examples of nonstandard usage and poor editorial work and proofreading which make them unsuitable for classroom material. The implication for English language teaching is that to many people, especially language learners in a preponderantly illiterate society, the written word and the radio are flawless and sacrosanct. "I read it in the papers" and "I heard it on the radio" are the expressions often used to underscore the infallibility of the print media and the voice of the radio. This makes the task of the teacher difficult, and unfortunately the newspaper and radio are such powerful channels for dissemination of ideas that they easily perpetuate these problems for language teachers and learners.

Suggested Solution

So what is the solution? The answer to this question is that there is no one solution. Only a series of steps can be suggested to alleviate the problem.

Of course newspapers are used in the English classroom because of the scarcity of books and related learning materials. The higher the quality of newspapers, the better the language teaching aids they make. The first step, therefore, is for the English teachers through their associations to influence the quality of the newspapers. This influence can take the form of making them aware, through the National Press Committee, of the problems they are creating. A compilation of the problem areas, directly taken from the papers, is a significant initial step. It is also important that unacceptable use of language by the radios is recorded, compiled and presented to the radio stations.

There is certainly no better agent of good language teaching than the language teacher himself/herself. The teacher should take the papers to class and show his/her students the unacceptable elements of language in them, be they misspelling, ungrammatical constructions or

wrong form of words. Such a lesson may thus start with what is not or what it should not be, rather than what it is. In the case of the radio, it is advisable to record the relevant programs and let the class listen to them with a view to correcting what is wrong.

Conclusion

The mass media can facilitate English language teaching and learning, but this role is impossible if the mass media itself uses incorrect expressions and forms of the language. This does not mean I am against the use of local varieties of language; nor does it mean rejection of, or resistance to changes in the language, itself. It means media and educators must watch for deviant language items that make teaching difficult and/or render communication ineffective.

Joe Pemagbi is Associate Professor and head of the Department of Language Education, Njala University College, University of Sierra Leone.

References

- Changshu, C. 1992. Using VOA English programs in the classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 30, 4, pp. 38-40.
- Pemagbi, J. 1991. The implications of the new English in Sierra Leone for the English language teacher. *Educational Research in Africa*, 2.
- Tapia, A. R. R. 1993. Using the newspapers with beginners. *English Teaching Forum*, 31, 1, p. 46.